PUGET SOUND ADVOCATES FOR RETIREMENT ACTION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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ROBBY STERN OF PUGET SOUND ADVOCATES FOR RETIREMENT ACTION

INTERVIEWEE: ROBBY STERN

INTERVIEWERS: ANGIE BARTELS, KAREN RICHTER

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[00:00:00] **ANGIE BARTELS:** Today is Monday, December 3, 2018. My name is Angie Bartels. I am a member of PSARA, and I'm here today with Karen Richter and Robby Stern.

Karen and I are interviewing Robby for the PSARA project. Robby, as everyone knows, is the President of the PSARA Education Fund. He's also on the Executive Board of PSARA and serves on the editorial committee for *The Advocate*.

PSARA is Puget Sound Advocates for Retirement Action. We are sitting of the Washington State Labor Council in downtown Seattle.

Let us proceed. Robby, Karen and I were thinking that we'd really like to hear about your early life—where you come from, what your family was like, what things influenced you to become a political activist, and then what path have you been trodding along? But we'd really like you to talk about your early years, if you could.

[00:01:27] **ROBBY STERN:** Okay. I'm first generation. My parents and my brother were immigrants from Nazi Germany. My brother was an infant or a toddler when they came to this country. They came at the end of 38.

My dad had been in a concentration camp in Germany—Sachsenhausen—where he had been taken because he was Jewish. It was a slave labor camp with lots of people dying. My mother and my brother were outside of the camp. They were not taken because this was not the time of mass extermination.

My mother was working really hard to get visas so that my mother, my father and my brother could leave Germany and come to the United States, where her sister was, with her husband. She was, one, a gorgeous woman. She was just stunningly beautiful. You'd never know that from me, but she was stunningly beautiful.

She was also very smart and very determined. She had gone to the American Embassy to try to get a visa, but the line outside was hugely long of people trying to get out. But she noticed that the U.S. head of the Embassy had the same last name as her maiden name.

She went home, and she was able to call and indicate her name was Enid Teller, and she wanted to speak to this fellow whose last name was Teller. She said, "I happened to notice that you were there when I came to get a visa. I was wondering if maybe we're related."

He said, "Oh, no, no, we're not related, but I did notice you." Because she was so stunning. The pictures of her are amazing. He said, "Come on in."

So, she came in. I don't know if she had to sleep with him or not. But she was able to get not only a visa for herself and my dad and my brother, but for another family that had asked her to help as well, saving their lives as well.

With the visas, she was then able to bring that to the Nazi authorities, and with the visa, they were prepared to let my dad [out] and that's what they did. As long as they knew you were leaving, they'd let you out.

My dad came home and he was literally a skeleton.

[00:04:56] **ANGIE:** About what year was this, Robby?

[00:05:05] **ROBBY:** 38. There's a whole story about what happened on Kristelnacht for the family, but they left Germany and came to the United States. Very hard life. They didn't speak English. They made the decision not to talk ever again about what happened.

[00:05:30] **KAREN RICHTER:** Robby, could I stop you for a moment?

[00:05:31] **ROBBY:** Sure.

[00:05:33] **KAREN:** You said that there was a story about Kristelnacht. I feel like this might be the time to tell it, if you feel [comfortable doing so] .

[00:05:41] **ROBBY:** Oh, yeah. We don't hide it. What happened was that my mom was living in an apartment. I'm having a senior moment so I'm forgetting the name of the town that she was in. There was a German policeman who walked the beat, and who had been aware of my mother because she had been taking my brother out in a stroller, walking him.

He was also aware that my dad had just been released from Sachsenhausen. He said to her, "You want to get him away from here. There's going to be an attack on Jews. It would be either tonight or tomorrow night."

Mom had to make a Sophie's choice. She had to decide what to do. She decided to take my dad to a different town where he was not known and leave my brother, who was an infant, with a Gentile babysitter in the apartment.

She took him to—I forget the name of the town. I have it all written down but I don't have it in my memory bank. They walked the streets all night. She kept him going. He was just a wreck. The Nazi gangs were out breaking all of the windows—that's why it was called Kristelnacht—of all the Jewish stores, and beating up Jewish men. She just kept him going.

The next day, she went back to the apartment. The Nazis had come, and they had trashed the apartment and had stolen a bunch of stuff, but they didn't harm my brother. Immediately from there, they went and hid in a warehouse where their furniture was stored, until the boat was set to leave for the United States.

They came to the United States and they came to New York. Then they moved to Richmond, Virginia, where my mom's father and mother were living, because they had left earlier. My dad got a job as what was called then a "grease monkey." The reason why it was called that is back then, the cars had to be greased. You all probably don't remember this because you're too young.

[00:08:34] **ANGIE:** I do.

[00:08:34] **KAREN:** We do, absolutely.

[00:08:34] **ROBBY:** He worked in a garage, and that's where he learned some of his English, and it was a pretty rough English that he learned there.

He had been a textile apprentice in Germany. He came from a very poor family. He did not want to leave his mom there, but his mom said, "You have to leave and then you can send for me."

His mom was a very poor peasant woman. My dad's father had died in his early forties with diabetes, but they weren't able to treat diabetes back then. So, she was very, very poor, and my dad was her only birth child. My grandfather, who I never knew, had been married previously, and his wife had died. There were five kids from that marriage. They then became a part of Minna's [home] .

[00:09:40] **KAREN:** Can you tell us who Minna is?

[00:09:46] **ROBBY:** Minna is my grandmother. She had a big garden, and she raised vegetables, and she fed people. She was a very generous soul.

So, when my mom and dad came to Richmond with my brother, he was trying really hard to raise enough money to be able to get his mother here, which meant having to bribe because the government was not allowing

Jews in anymore, which meant having to bribe the Cuban government to get into Cuba, and then she could immigrate from Cuba.

[00:10:28] **KAREN:** The U.S. government wasn't allowing Jews in? What year was that?

[00:10:33] **ROBBY:** This would have been around 39 and 40. They were letting a few in, but not many. They had a very strict quota.

Before he could raise the money, she was murdered by the Nazis. That was something that stuck with him all of his life, as did his own experience in the camp, where he saw brutality, and people being brutalized in a way that none of us can imagine.

He then got a job, because he had been a textile apprentice, as a traveling salesman. I don't know if you are old enough to remember the traveling salesmen who went around with their sample cases?

[00:11:32] **KAREN:** Yeah.

[00:11:34] **ROBBY:** Big, black suitcases. He got hired by a company called Kiddy Clothes. His territory was North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. My mom and my dad and my brother moved to Charlotte, which was still a decent drive to Richmond. There were no super highways, but I remember, after I was born, making the drive to Richmond.

He went on the road. They were really, really poor. Really poor. In fact, the story was that he would shut the engine off on his car when there was a big hill so he could avoid using gas.

[00:12:28] **ANGIE:** Do you know what he drove?

[00:12:31] **ROBBY:** I don't. I was born in 44.

[00:12:37] **ANGIE:** All this was taking place from the time of the Depression and when the U.S. was moving into ramping on for World War II.

[00:12:52] **ROBBY:** Right. I was born in March of 44 and I was the child of hope. I was kind of the big fuck you to the Nazis. But they were still poor. They were living in a duplex. I don't remember much about that time except there was a woman—back then, African Americans basically served as domestic help. Even though my parents didn't have much money, they were able to hire a woman named Ethel Goldman, who would take care of me when my mom was working.

The neighbors that were living around them, the women, were knitting booties and other different children's stuff. They would knit little wool booties and stuff and my dad started taking those on the road and selling them as well.

Then he opened up a little company, kind of a matchbox, where he began to start taking clothes out. Ultimately, he built up a business from that. But he was really, really damaged goods. He had been brutalized. We didn't know the term at the time, but he definitely had PTSD. Plus, he wasn't able to save his beloved mother's life, which haunted him for his entire life.

When he was in his final years, and was quite sick, he was having all kinds of visions of what went on in Germany, and screaming. The same thing was true with my mom, who died much later than my dad.

[00:15:34] **ANGIE:** Another effect of PTSD.

[00:15:37] **ROBBY:** Right. And the fact that they decided not to talk about it didn't help, because they could not deal with their emotions around it. They did not want to have to deal with it. There's a story about that that we'll get to much later where I sat down with my parents and said, "This is my story, my legacy. You have to tell it to me." They couldn't, but they wrote it, and it's become a family document that now my kids and others have that is the story as they told it.

Ethel became a really, really important figure in my life because my parents were totally closed in, totally not able to deal with emotions, very rigid in a whole variety of ways. They did the best they could, but they weren't particularly good parents at all.

We moved from High Street to Lombardy Circle. I remember being there. Mom was working with Dad in his business. They worked together full-time. She kind of kept him emotionally together in her own way.

The textile was a really tough, tough business because what you had to do was design what's called a line, where it's what you're going to manufacture; that you're going to have salespeople out on the road with their black suitcases to stores. And then you have to go into debt to purchase all the materials you need to manufacture the goods because they couldn't order it and have you say, "Well, we'll get it to you in six months," or something like that. That's not how it works.

Dad would go into debt big time twice or three times a year. Then we called it my father's period because he was just absolutely convinced that he was going to go broke, and that if something happened like happened to the family in Germany, he would not be able to save anyone's life. That was the fear that he had for his entire life. His entire life. Well, maybe not after he retired.

I was raised in this household with my brother, who was seven years older than me. My brother really had a hard time. He went through the whole trauma in Germany. He went through the whole trauma of coming here. I wasn't around when my grandfather was murdered. He went through all of that. And his was a really rough upbringing. He, in turn, was damaged by that. Given what he went through, he's done okay.

I don't remember all that much about my early childhood. Charlotte had a very small Jewish community, maybe 300, 400 families. It was the segregated South, so Jews caught a whole lot of crap because it was pretty anti-Semitic and we felt it. I certainly felt it, although I didn't know what I was feeling in school. I was in school and we were a very small minority.

[00:20:17] **ANGIE:** Did your family go to temple?

[00:20:19] **ROBBY:** Yes, our lives really centered around the Jewish community. There was no real genuine social relationships between Jews and non-Jews that I know. Certainly, no one that I knew—and we had a fairly close-knit Jewish community—had genuine relationships outside the Jewish community.

We belonged to a temple, and almost my entire social life revolved around the kids that I knew from the temple. I went to nursery school at the temple. Then my mom, maybe because she just wanted to get me out of the house, started me in school really early. I don't know what year. I think I was in the first grade when I was five. I graduated high school when I was 17 and I spent almost the entire time of my freshman year at Syracuse as 17. I didn't turn 18 until March of my freshman year.

[00:21:49] **KAREN:** You were advanced.

[00:21:50] **ROBBY:** No, I don't think I was advanced. She did not stick me there because I was advanced, I'll assure you of that. [laughter]

[00:22:03] **ANGIE:** She needed to get you out of the house for her.

[00:22:06] **ROBBY:** One thing that my mom had problems with was the closeness of my relationship with Ethel. That was a problem for her, and it remained a problem for her for a lot of years because even as an adult, [Dina?] brought Ethel out here in the summer, and she spent six weeks with us. And whenever we went up to Charlotte, we had to go and visit with Ethel and her family.

That was very difficult for her. Actually, they began to travel with my dad's business built up and they started selling to Montgomery Ward and Sears, they'd leave me with Ethel. I don't remember this but this is what Ethel told me. One time when they came home and we went to the train station to meet them, I didn't want to leave Ethel's side, and that was the end of Ethel staying with me while they were traveling. My aunt and uncle, who were not real good—they didn't have kids—but they felt safe to my mom and dad.

I went to school early. That was hard. I was a lot younger than the other kids, a lot less mature. But that was what happened.

[00:24:05] **KAREN:** When you were in the first grade, was that still in the Jewish community, or was that in a public school?

[00:24:09] **ROBBY:** No, that was Happy Hours First Grade at some church or something. In second grade, I went to public elementary school. I was in the public elementary school, and then the junior high and senior high were all in the same location.

[00:24:27] **ANGIE:** Also public school?

[00:24:28] **ROBBY:** Yeah. But a lot of my social life as a kid growing up centered around my Jewish friends. You asked, how did I become an activist? I think that the first of several reasons—actually two or several reasons—one was my family background. Not knowing exactly how it impacted me, but I knew that there had been something very wrong. And, for whatever reason, I thought about what's fair and what's right. Also, being raised in a segregated South. I think that impacted me as well.

My parents were fairly liberal in their politics. My mom and my dad both voted for Adlai Stevenson against Eisenhower, the first one I can remember of an election in 52. Then my mom supported Adlai Stevenson in 56. My dad supported Eisenhower. But they both supported Kennedy in 60. They were kind of liberal—not activists, but liberal—so that also influenced me as well.

There was this Jewish youth organization. It was a B'nai B'rith youth organization, and then it was divided into a boys' group called AZA—Aleph Zada Aleph— and BBG, the B'nai B'rith Girls. There were a lot of activities that we engaged in, and it was all over the country. It's [unintelligible] .

There were things that we did, like you had debates, and we had oratory contests as well as athletic competitions. I was super into athletics. The questions that were raised that we had to consider were timely questions of the day, and that influenced me as well. I was already predisposed to more progressive thinking, as well as at a deep level being aware of my family history.

In high school, what was great was BBYO. I had friendships there that lasted for many, many years. High school was yucky.

[00:27:59] **KAREN:** We would probably all agree with that.

[00:28:00] **ROBBY:** Is that right? It wasn't just me that had a bad high school? That's good to know. Yours wasn't so bad?

[00:28:07] **ANGIE:** So-so. I kind of went both ways.

[00:28:11] **ROBBY:** But I never did quite understand why I couldn't be part of the social in-crowd. I didn't get the whole thing about anti-Semitism. I just didn't get it.

[00:28:34] **KAREN:** When did you first experience it that you were aware that that's what it was?

[00:28:39] **ROBBY:** It came much later, Karen. It came much later, when I looked back on it all and had the perspicacity to think about it, and think, oh, this was what was going on. Isn't that interesting? It's just something you experience, and you don't know why, but you turn it in on yourself.

[00:29:09] **ANGIE:** Yeah, something must be wrong with me because people are treating me this way.

[00:29:14] **ROBBY:** That's right. Exactly. But the one thing I knew is I wanted to get out, for a whole variety of reasons.

[00:29:27] **KAREN:** Get out of Charlotte? Get out of the South?

[00:29:34] **ROBBY:** Yeah, I wanted to get out. My first opportunity came with going to college. I didn't know anything about any colleges. The college counseling was atrocious.

[00:29:49] **KAREN:** Were you a good student?

[00:29:54] **ROBBY:** I would say I was a B student. I was definitely anywhere near the top. I did okay. I applied to North Carolina and Duke and Lehigh, for whatever reason, I don't know. I think I liked the name, and Syracuse because I liked the name. [laughter]

Because my parents didn't know anything. They wanted me to go to Harvard. There was no way I was going to go to Harvard. That was kind of like the immigrant dream. But I was definitely not Harvard material. In fact, my mother had me write a letter to them when I was a sophomore in high school. [laughter] Crazy.

[00:30:43] **KAREN:** Did they answer you?

[00:30:43] **ROBBY:** Yeah, they did, and they said, "It's a little early. You just file an application." But I got into Syracuse and that was my escape. So, when I was 17 years old, I went off to Syracuse, New York, and that's where I became a real activist. That's where I took the skills that I had gained as a result of my participation in BBYO, the things that I had learned from my own history at home and with my family.

Mind you, I didn't know a whole bunch. I just knew my grandmother had been murdered, that my dad had been in a concentration camp. Honestly, that's really all I knew at that point.

[00:31:43] **ANGIE:** Can you describe how that transformation occurred, either from trying to be more objective, like step by step, here's what I did? Or does it fit more with your story internally, the transformation that occurred?

[00:32:07] **ROBBY:** Becoming an activist?

[00:32:10] **ANGIE:** Yeah.

[00:32:15] **ROBBY:** I got out, and I got to Syracuse, and I was elected the president of my floor in DellPlain Hall, which was an 8th-floor dormitory—guys. Then I got elected as the president of the dorm. I had some skills. I had some skills that I had learned through my involvement with BBYO. I was far from mature, but I had some skills.

[00:32:51] **KAREN:** You knew how to talk.

[00:32:52] **ROBBY:** I knew how to talk and I had a belief system about things being fair and stuff. At Syracuse, the way that freshman officers were elected was that the two political parties, which were made up primarily of fraternities and sororities, would decide who the candidates were. That just didn't seem fair to me. Why would the freshmen not choose their own candidates?

I talked to other presidents of other freshman dorms, and we got together and we went to the political parties and we said, "You all should let the freshmen choose who is going to be their officers." They weren't interested in doing that. They wanted to get the kids who they were going to rush to be the officers, so they wouldn't do it.

So, we formed a group called Freshmen for Free Elections, and we had a freshman convention, where delegates were elected. I remember some of the guys I worked with on that, and women. It was great.

We held this convention and we elected a couple of people to run as president and whatever the other officers were.

[00:34:42] **KAREN:** Were you one of them?

[00:34:43] **ROBBY:** No, I couldn't do that. I couldn't be the organizer and then run. That just didn't make sense.

[00:34:50] **ANGIE:** Would you describe yourself as "the" primary organizer, or "a"?

[00:34:56] **ROBBY:** "A." We kicked their butts. That got me going. And then, in my freshman year, there was a strong presence of civil rights activists at Syracuse. They invited Jerome Smith and Ronnie Moore, who were two of the Freedom Riders, to Syracuse to talk about their experience.

I went to that. I still had a Southern accent. I used to say cee-ment instead of cement. I went and heard them speak, and I remember, I raised my hand to ask a question. I remember it was something like, "I really agree with what y'all are doing, but don't you think you're trying to go a little bit too fa-yust?"

They proceeded to just, in a very gentle but loving way, to put me down, and I knew I had been put down. I said, "Oh, my goodness, I've got to do something." That's when I got involved in civil rights. I became a member of the Congress of Racial Equality [CORE], which is where the Freedom Riders came from, and became very active.

There was a group called Syracuse University Committee on Equality, so I got involved in this combination of campus politics and other stuff that was going on.

[00:36:49] **KAREN:** What year was this, Robby?

[00:36:51] **ROBBY:** This would have been in 62, in the spring of 62. That was where I really became an activist. I ultimately ran for president of the student body in my junior year and lost, but then was elected the

speaker of the student senate, where I propose that we pass legislation that Syracuse should no longer participate in any sports events with segregated schools. That was super controversial.

I worked with some of the Black athletes, but other Black athletes would have nothing to do with it. I remember, after we passed that legislation, there was what was called TGIF—thank God it's Friday—and we'd go off to this place, I think it was called the Tecumseh Country Club—it was a place where students went to drink. I went up there after it was passed—there was really a lot in the paper and stuff—and there were some of the football players up there and they were really pissed. They were getting ready to kick my ass.

Then this big, white guy, who played offensive tackle on the football team—he went on to have a professional career—his name was Henry Huettner. He went by the name Hank Huettner. He came and put his big arm, which was as big as my head, around my shoulder and said, "Anyone who fucks with Robby is going to have to fuck with me." That ended it.

It was a very interesting time. The guy who was the speaker at my inauguration was a guy by the name of George Wiley, who was a professor in engineering, but he went on to become the head of the [National] Welfare Rights Organization, an African American man.

There were a number of people who had a big influence on my life at that point.

[00:39:22] **ANGIE:** I have a question. It sounds to me like you had qualities in your personality that allowed you to examine your position and examine how you felt about something, and to listen to information that was provided to you, and really examine your own position and question it, question the validity, and maybe feel like you need to change course. What is it about who you are, or where you come from, that gives you that quality?

[00:40:00] **ROBBY:** I don't know that I had to change course. I had to change how I thought about the course that I was on. What is it?

[00:40:04] **ANGIE:** Introspection, and also, I feel like it's a lack of defensiveness about who you were, who you are, and the ability to have an openness, to listen to other people, to really examine what they're saying, and then put it into the context of your own life and what you should do. I'm just always interested. What do you think it is about your life that gave you that ability?

[00:41:15] **ROBBY:** I don't know. I've never thought of that question. I've never introspected on it. [laughter] I think that to me, it felt more like a trajectory, as opposed to a shift. I felt like there was some kind of continuity between—clearly, I made a break from my parents. A big break. That was very difficult for them. They were very frightened by what I was doing.

I remember my mom, when they came up for—they were worried about this early on with me.

[00:42:17] **KAREN:** How early?

[00:42:21] **ROBBY:** I think it would have been when I was in my latter teens maybe.

[00:42:31] **KAREN:** When you were in college, or in high school?

[00:42:34] **ROBBY:** It might have been when I was 16, when I was home, and making the decision that I wanted to go to Syracuse. Then I went off at 17. I was a young 17 when I went off.

[00:42:53] **ANGIE:** Just barely.

[00:42:53] **ROBBY:** But for me, it was kind of the combination of taking my family's experience, my experience as a minority, where I was born and raised, the liberal rhetoric that existed around me. And then, whoever I was at the core of who I am . . .

[00:43:42] **KAREN:** How about politics at this point in time in your life? Were you paying attention to everything that was happening on the national scene and how it was playing?

[00:43:50] **ROBBY:** Uh-huh. We didn't have the New York Times down there, but, yeah, I certainly was paying attention to the extent that I could. I knew, for example, that I supported Kennedy. I knew that I was for nuclear disarmament. I knew then—because the sit-ins had started in Greensboro, North Carolina—that I was supportive of the women and men—the young women and men—who were sitting in. I thought that the way they were being treated was horrible. I didn't do it myself, but I knew that.

At the time, I very much also identified with Israel and that whole notion that it was a place where survivors went and built a new life. That changed when I went to Israel in 1962. But early on, that was a very idealistic notion that I had.

[00:45:18] **ANGIE:** You were 18 when you went to Israel?

[00:45:20] **ROBBY:** I was. And I thought I was going to love it, and I ended up not loving it.

[00:45:26] **KAREN:** How long were you there?

[00:45:29] **ROBBY:** I think about six weeks. I enjoyed being on a kibbutz. I enjoyed cavorting about with the women and men there—the young people, teenagers—but I was super aware of what seemed to me to be the unfair difference between how the Palestinians were having to live and how the Israelis were living. I was really surprised.

Angie, getting back to your question, I do think it was more of a trajectory that forced me to make adjustments in terms of my thinking. So, no, there was no such thing as going too fa-yust when it came to basic human rights. That was something that I had heard in my own family that we support, but they're just trying to push things too fa-yust.

I ended up joining a fraternity.

[00:46:46] **KAREN:** Which one did you join?

[00:46:49] **ROBBY:** It was a Jewish fraternity, Tau Epsilon Phi. I was there for a while, but I left in my senior year. I was a contradiction, I think. I was a contradiction. But events impacted me.

I had some amazing teachers at Syracuse. It was a fantastic education.

[00:47:26] **KAREN:** What were you studying at that time?

[00:47:28] **ROBBY:** My major was political science and sociology. But I also had an amazing English teacher, a guy named David Owens. We read all these terrific books—Richard Baldwin. C. Wright Mills was in sociology. The Invisible Man by Ralph Ellision. Native Son by Richard Wright. Those had a big influence on me and my thinking.

In political science and sociology, I had these really smart professors. Oliver Edmund Clubb, who was one of the early critics of the Vietnam War.

We had the second teach-in in the United States at Syracuse, after the University of Michigan. It was an all-night thing where people spoke both for and against the war in Vietnam, and I came away from that really clear that the war was wrong.

That had an enormous influence on me intellectually, which I then—and one of the things that I have a lot of—sometimes to a fault, often to a fault—is enthusiasm. As I've gotten older, my enthusiasm has been tempered somewhat by my physical capacities.

Once I understood something intellectually, I had to act on it. It wasn't enough just to understand. I had to do something. And once you start acting, that influences you so much because the first time you go out on a picket line—the very first time—you feel like you wish the ground would fall out from underneath me, and then all of a sudden, I'm there and this is right.

When something made sense to me, I had to act on it, and that sometimes got me in a lot of trouble. [laughter]

[00:50:25] **ANGIE:** Yes, we want to hear about that.

[00:50:41] **KAREN:** I think what we'd like to do is hear about your experiences in college and then in law school. I think it would be nice to hear that. We've got approximately a half hour to 40 minutes. But we're going to take a break and we'll be right back.

[00:51:04] **00:** 51:00

[00:51:04] **KAREN:** We're back from the break. So, Robby, tell us more.

[00:51:13] **ROBBY:** Syracuse was absolutely fundamental to my life following it. I did a year of graduate school at Syracuse as well. I also married Susan Stern, who I met in David Owens's class in my senior year.

[00:51:46] **ANGIE:** What was her last name?

[00:51:48] **ROBBY:** It was Tannenbaum. She got pregnant, so we decided to get married.

[00:52:06] **KAREN:** What year was this?

[00:52:19] **ROBBY:** This was in 65. I knew we were not ready to have a baby. That would have been really bad. We were living in an apartment together. This was when I was a senior. She was even ahead of me. She graduated early.

We made a commitment to get married, but I really was urging her not to have the baby. This was at a time when abortion was illegal. She finally agreed that it probably would be best not to have a baby. Then we had this terrifying experience of—I don't remember who told us about this abortion clinic in Union City, New Jersey. But we drove down to Union City, New Jersey, and I had to leave her on a street corner. She got picked up there and she went to this clinic. I had to come back, I don't know how many hours later, and pick her up on the street corner.

Everything went okay. Everything went all right, but it was just purely terrifying. It was already not clear whether this was a good idea, but we'd gone too far down the road. Got married in July, after I graduated from college. Just turned 21. [laughter] She was a little older. She was 22.

Then I started graduate school in sociology in a master's program, and Susan went into what was called the urban teachers program. It didn't work out so well for Susan, and she was also forced to leave. But I did a bunch of graduate work in sociology. I didn't get a master's degree, but I did a whole bunch of course work. The nice thing was that I also got the opportunity to be a TA, which was really helpful, because it allowed me to get a job when we moved to Seattle.

We both remained activists. I graduated from Syracuse with a BA. Went into the graduate program. Went for a year. We both had decided that we would apply to the West Coast. She wanted to get away from her family, which was bad news.

We applied to various West Coast schools, she in social work and me for the law school. We both got in at the University of Washington. I had seen Seattle. After I graduated from high school, my parents had paid for me to take a tour around the country with a bunch of other kids my age. I had come to Seattle on a gorgeous August day, and the mountains were out and the water was like sparkling diamonds, and I just thought, I want to come back here to live.

We both got in here. Susan got money from the School of Social Work. I got into the law school, and then I got an instructor job at what was at that time Seattle Community College. There wasn't a North Seattle, South Seattle and Seattle Central, there was just Seattle Community College, and they were holding night classes in various high schools around the area.

I was teaching sociology for one quarter out in West Seattle, one quarter in Ballard, various places. A guy by the name of Dan Peterson, who was the head of the Social Studies Department, hired me. Sweet guy. He was a WSSRA [Washington State School Retirees Association] member until he died.

But I immediately got involved in activism on campus. The activism that I got involved in was the founding of a group called the University District Movement. I was the spokesperson for it. What was the University District Movement all about?

[00:58:21] **KAREN:** Did you live in the University District?

[00:58:23] **ROBBY:** We lived on Capitol Hill, on 10th Avenue East. What was happening was that this was in 66 and there were a lot of counterculture people in the U District with long hair. A lot going on. So, there was police harassment. The people that owned the apartments and stuff would not rent to people with long hair, and the businesses in the U District were discriminating against people with long hair.

We formed the University District Movement to protest this activity. We had a big ol' march. It was very controversial. It's really funny because yesterday, we were at my wife's cousin's house—Spider—and they had been cleaning out their attic. They found a copy of The Tyee magazine.

The Tyee magazine was an alumni magazine from the University of Washington. It was telling the story of that time. Lo and behold, there is a picture of me in this magazine. They gave it to us last night. At that time, I was 23 years old. I had a beard. My hair got much longer than it was there.

This University District Movement really was the precursor to huge activism at the University of Washington. At the time, the people that were leading SDS on campus would hold events like "Gentle Thursday" and do chalk drawings and stuff. There was a Vietnam Day Committee on campus.

Getting back to law school. I was totally involved and active with the University District Movement, and then got involved with other activist stuff, and almost flunked out of law school. When I say "almost," you had to maintain an average of 68.00 and I had an average of 68.00. It was really close—really, really close—because I just was not paying attention to law school. I was paying attention to activism.

From the University District Movement, I got very much involved with SDS, the antiwar movement, the anti-imperialist movement. We took over the SDS here and it became the main force of activism on the campus in the late 60s. I was probably recognized as the most prominent spokesperson for the organization, although there were others who spoke up. It was still a pretty sexist time.

Also, Susan and I broke up, finally. We had had a lot of separations and stuff, and then finally, we broke up, which was really a good thing, although I did remain, and she did remain, in each other's lives till she died in the 70s.

I became very much involved in the SDS. There was antiwar stuff that we were doing—a lot of it—and anti-imperialist stuff. Ultimately, I was suspended from the university for some of that activity.

I was also traveling to other parts of the state to build SDS chapters, and other institutions. I went to Washington State University, the University of Idaho, and Western and Central. It was all centering around Vietnam, and the realization that Vietnam was not a mistake, but it was part of the overall imperialist policies of this country.

I had learned the hustle enough in law school, and I was very motivated in my second year because there was a financial award for the most improved student, and I had no place to go but up. [laughter] So, I won the award for the most improved student, and got the financial reward, and used it to go fishing. [laughter]

I love to fish. I fished for years. I started fishing when I was a little kid. I'd go fishing in Freedom Park Lake when I was maybe eight or nine. I fished up until the time I stopped eating fish.

I became more and more radicalized, more and more—racism was something that . . . I remember working . . . there was the grape boycott. I'm sure you all remember the time of the grape boycott. I remember that in the University of Washington cafeteria, they had grapes, so a group of us came in and just took them and threw them away. It led to a referendum on campus about whether the university should serve grapes, which we won.

[01:05:39] **ANGIE:** How did you win that? How did you pressure the university to stop purchasing grapes?

[01:05:44] **ROBBY:** We had a vote and students voted to not—

[01:05:48] **ANGIE:** So, the student council ruled what was—

[01:05:51] **ROBBY:** The student council held an election and the student body voted. That's my memory. It's a vague memory, so don't stake your life on it.

What led to my suspension was there was a United Fruit recruiter on campus. United Fruit was very much in the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Jomo Arbenz [note: transcriber found Jacobo Arbenz Guzman 01:06:32] in Guatemala.

We felt that United Fruit should not be allowed to recruit on campus, so we held a demonstration at Loew Hall, which is where the recruitment center was. We had a whole, big group of people. We did some guerrilla theater. We went into the room where the recruiter was. Interestingly, one of the people who was part of the collective that did the guerrilla theater was a guy who turned out to be an undercover cop. His job was to hold this big banana and just pet it. [laughter] Anyway, we ran the guy off campus. Literally ran the guy off campus.

[01:07:19] **ANGIE:** How did you find out that he was undercover?

[01:07:24] **ROBBY:** It came out later. We didn't know it at the time but it came out later. Then I ran into him when he was a cop, which was really weird. Then I ran into him after he was a cop—he became a lawyer. I ran into him on a ferry,

As a result of that demonstration, the university brought charges against five of us for disrupting university activity. They were going to hold a trial. What we did was we invited some of the Maryknoll priests who had been in Guatemala during the time of the overthrow of Arbenz to testify.

We had a demonstration out in front of the HUB. Then we marched down to the Forestry Building, where the trial was to be held. The head of the trial panel was one of my most favorite professors from the university, a guy named Cornelius Peck, who had been one of my labor law teachers. We really liked each other, but he had been selected to be the head of the panel.

We got down there and the crowd was much bigger than the room. Probably there were 900 to 1,000 people. The crowd was much bigger than the room, so they tried to bar us from coming in. I was up in the front and I said, "I'm on trial. If you don't want me to come in, that's fine."

So, they had to open for me, and then I held the door open, and then everyone poured in. Cornelius was just freaked by all the people that were all over the place. He declared that the trial was closed. Then they held the trial subsequently in a smaller room, but they televised it into the HUB ballroom.

They found us guilty, some less so than others. They said that I was to be suspended for two quarters, unless I would sign a statement that I would not engage in any further disruptive activity at the University of Washington, which I wasn't about to do. So, I was suspended. This was in the fall or winter of 68. It had to have been the winter.

I left law school and decided that I wanted to be involved in working-class organizing in opposition to the war.

[01:10:57] **ANGIE:** Was that a particularly difficult time for you? It sounds like here you were, suspended from law school for two quarters. Your marriage either was breaking up or had broken up.

[01:11:14] **ROBBY:** It had broken up. That whole period was difficult. That whole period was, people talk about the wonders of the 60s, and in some ways, that's right. But in some ways, it was very difficult, and very scary.

[01:11:38] **ANGIE:** Painful.

[01:11:39] **ROBBY:** Yeah, because the government was targeting us, and we'd had no idea just how powerful the government could be. When I was suspended, I did not want to be a lawyer, because I saw lawyers as being part of the establishment, as part of the unjust legal system. Clearly, there were a number of lawyers who were not, who were doing really decent things.

At that time, I felt I was a revolutionary. I felt like the only thing that made sense was revolution. Did I really understand what revolution was? No. But I had started reading Marx and Lenin. Obviously, I was very aware of Cuba and France and all, and the Black Panther Party.

[01:12:50] **KAREN:** Had you met members of the Black Panther Party at that point?

[01:12:57] **ROBBY:** Oh, yeah.

[01:12:58] **KAREN:** You were working with them?

[01:13:00] **ROBBY:** Yeah. I should back up some. Back when I was in law school—I forget what year it was, Larry could tell you—this is the story we told when you did the thing with Tony.

[01:13:13] **KAREN:** Larry Gossett?

[01:13:14] **ROBBY:** Yeah. Larry was a member of the party, but he was also a founder of the BSU [Black Student Union] .

[01:13:23] **KAREN:** Is that Black Student Union?

[01:13:24] **ROBBY:** Yeah, the Black Student Union. The BSU decided that they were going to occupy the president's office—because there were maybe 30, 35, 40 Black students on campus and that was all—and make some demands around bringing more Black students in.

SDS was allies of the BSU, but they told us nothing about it because they wanted to have the element of surprise. They did not want to take a chance that someone would get in the way. They took over the president's office and there were four of us that went in with them. It was me and Susan and someone who I ultimately became lovers with, Lesley—I forget her last name—and [Skip Dennis?] , who was married to Molly.

We went in with them and there were Panthers there. What I didn't know was that there were guns there. Also there had been a meeting, I think, of the president of the university's cabinet, and one of my law school professors, Arval Morris, was there. He just kind of stuck around, and we were just sitting there, waiting for whatever negotiations were going on.

Meanwhile, the police were outside. A bunch of white students had gathered and were yelling, "Lock 'em up!" It was a scene. But they didn't lock us up, and we walked out of there, and they got the program that they wanted.

[01:15:26] **KAREN:** What was the program?

[01:15:29] **ROBBY:** I forget the name of the office. Minority Affairs, I think it was called. They did a lot of recruitment of African Americans. Larry ultimately became a part of providing services here at the university. That kind of cemented Larry's and my relationship, which has been in existence for a lot of years.

That was the kind of stuff that was going on. There was so much stuff going on. So, back to your point, it was both enthralling and scary, and there was some loneliness, for sure. Although that was definitely a time when—I don't think I should say this—where I had a lot of serial relationships.

Ultimately, I left the U. That was when the Weathermen formed. I had gone to the convention in Chicago, where there had been a split in SDS and where the Weathermen formed. I had gone with the Weathermen faction, but as that developed more, I just didn't feel comfortable at that time with it.

[01:17:09] **KAREN:** Why would that be?

[01:17:12] **ROBBY:** Because they seemed, to me, to be writing off the white working-class, and I didn't think that was correct. I made the decision, with Lesley, that we would move down to California and join a group of people down there called the Hayward Collective, who were organizing in factories, and trying to talk to white working-class people primarily.

[01:17:53] **KAREN:** Is this still part of the Weathermen?

[01:17:56] **ROBBY:** No. But ultimately, the Weathermen came there and the collective broke up. I went with the Weathermen for about 48 hours, but I was just not made of the stuff who could go underground and become—it just didn't make sense to me.

[01:18:16] **ANGIE:** Rob banks.

[01:18:19] **ROBBY:** I don't know that they robbed banks, but whatever, it just didn't make sense to me, so I didn't go that road. But that was hard. It was lonely.

[01:18:32] **KAREN:** But they believed in armed revolution. Right?

[01:18:35] **ROBBY:** That's right. I did, too, but I just wasn't—whatever it was that led people to do it, it didn't work for me.

[01:18:47] **KAREN:** Would you consider yourself a militant at this point? More than an activist.

[01:18:52] **ROBBY:** I think I was militant. I had several arrests prior to this. My very first arrest was—this was what I consider the end of my virginity—you know what I mean.

[01:19:16] **ANGIE:** Yeah.

[01:19:16] **ROBBY:** SDS, or at least part of the SDS that I was giving support to, [supported] the Nisqually Tribe and their fight for Native American fishing rights. I'd been reading a lot about the history of Native Americans and I felt like this seems righteous.

So, a group of us went down and lived at Frank's Landing [Indian Community] on the Nisqually River. It was under the leadership of a guy by the name of Hank Adams, and Al Bridges and Maiselle Bridges and Sid Bridges.

[01:20:19] **KAREN:** Was this with Billy Frank at all?

[01:20:23] **ROBBY:** Billy Frank's dad lived on Frank's Landing. Billy Frank remembered me from that. I remember Billy Frank's dad rocking on one of the houses at Frank's Landing. I didn't remember Billy Frank, but he remembered me.

[01:20:44] **ANGIE:** Billy Frank was a leader in the Nisqually Nation.

[01:20:48] **ROBBY:** Yeah, he was. Anyway, they decided to dramatize their protest by going to set their nets at Capitol Lake, where the dam is, so I got arrested defending the nets there. That was my very first arrest.

The reason why I raise that is when I went down to California, I had the second arrest that I had, as I remember it. I think this might have been the second. The GE workers, who were members of the United Electrical Workers, were on strike against GE.

I went with a group of people to picket in solidarity with them. Someone ran the picket line and bumped the person next to me, and I kicked his car with my steel-pointed boots. I ended up getting arrested for that, for malicious mischief and resisting arrest.

I'm still an activist, but I was not ready to go underground and consider myself an urban guerrilla. I just couldn't bring myself to do it. It just didn't make sense to me. I did end up going underground, however, after the most serious arrest I had, which was a felony arrest in Berkeley. I was underground for probably two or three months and then decided to go back and face the charges.

[01:22:51] **ANGIE:** What were the charges there?

[01:22:55] **ROBBY:** This was after the invasion of Cambodia. We were in California and a group of us, which included Roger Lippman, went to the protest with the idea in mind that we were going to break windows and do stuff. Very stupid.

[01:23:21] **ANGIE:** On campus?

[01:23:22] **ROBBY:** No. Very stupidly. But we were pissed. We were just pissed at what was going on. It was horrible. The bombing of the Vietnamese. All the other stuff. The killing of Fred Hampton. You just go on and on and on, all this terrible stuff.

We went to this demonstration, and we were wearing coats to hide—I was carrying a piece of pipe. We became aware that they knew who we were, so we decided to split up and meet at Shakey's Pizza Parlor on Shattuck, I think it was.

We split up, and it turned out that whoever was following us decided to follow two of the people who led him to Shakey's. Then the Berkeley Police came in and they arrested a bunch of us. But I had dropped the pipe on the floor when they came in, so they had nothing on me. They had to print it before they could bring charges.

I left, and that's when I went underground. I ended up going to Boston, where I lived for about two months. I had red hair. My name was Zach.

[01:24:58] **ANGIE:** I guess I don't understand. If you were walking around, did you do something at the demonstration that would cause—

[01:25:08] **ROBBY:** No, but that's a very interesting point that you're raising.

[01:25:12] **ANGIE:** You told me the charges and that they were felony charges, so how did you resolve that?

[01:25:19] **ROBBY:** What happened was that I was charged with possession of a dangerous weapon—the piece of pipe. All of us were charged with that.

When I came back, I turned myself in. Judge Talbott, who was the district court judge who heard it, listened to all the evidence and said, "What did they do? There's no basis for this charge." So, he dismissed the charges.

The FBI was at every single day of the hearing. They were waiting outside for us when we came out and they were following us everywhere we went. On the last day, we got out around noon, and there were three FBI cars who started following us everywhere. Everywhere we went.

We drove down to—I don't know where that Orange Julius was—and the two guys that were in the car got out to go get something at the Orange Julius. I was sitting in the car when the head of the FBI in Berkeley, Don Jones, came over, unlocked the car door, and then he and I got into a battle over me trying to get the door shut and him having the door open.

I got the door shut, and he took his fists, he smashed it against the driver's side window—it didn't break it—and he said, "We're going to kill you."

The guys came back. I told them about what happened. We started driving away. We were actually doing stuff—like there was this street in Berkeley where people would hitchhike down to the freeway and then hitchhike back—we would actually pick up hitchhikers. They'd get in the car. We'd go down to the end, let them out, turn around and come back. Each time, the cars from the FBI would pull over behind us, and then follow us down and then back.

Then we decided, okay, let's get out of Dodge. We decided to head down towards Palo Alto and they followed us, and kind of pushed us off the road with their cars.

[01:27:54] **KAREN:** This is like a bad movie.

[01:27:57] **ROBBY:** Yeah, it was scary. At any rate, we survived. The State appealed Judge Talbott's decision and a Reagan-appointed judge overturned Judge Talbott's decision and we were bound over to Superior Court.

[01:28:20] **ANGIE:** They could overturn—because there wasn't a jury trial?

[01:28:23] **ROBBY:** There wasn't a jury trial.

[01:28:24] **ANGIE:** Isn't that double jeopardy?

[01:28:26] **ROBBY:** No, no. This was a probable cause hearing that the judge decided that there was no probable cause.

[01:28:36] **ANGIE:** He was going to dismiss the charges.

[01:28:37] **ROBBY:** That's right. Then Judge Hayes—no, it wasn't Judge Hayes; he was the presiding judge in Superior Court. Whoever the Court of Appeals judge was overturned the decision of Judge Talbott, and then we were bound over to Superior Court, where I ultimately copped a plea. The expectation was that I was going to go to jail for a year.

But between the time that I pleaded and the time that the sentencing was, there was a change in the presiding judge. It was no longer Judge Hayes, it was Lionel Wilson, an African American man who ultimately was elected the Mayor of Oakland, who looked at the whole thing and said, "This stinks." He doesn't say this out loud, but obviously, he thought it.

But since I had already copped a plea, he couldn't take it back, so he said, "Okay, as long as you stay out of trouble for six months, we'll drop your felony to a misdemeanor. After 18 months, if you stay out of trouble, we'll expunge your record. So, that's what happened with those charges.

Roger, on the other hand, had charges that had been filed against him in Seattle for this conspiracy trial. He ended up being put in jail. He got out, and then he went back up to Seattle to face those charges.

That was that. Do you want to stop there?

[01:30:39] **ANGIE:** Unfortunately, I think that we should wind it up for the day. It's been an hour and a half. How would you like to end the session, Robby?

[01:30:49] **ROBBY:** I think we're about done.

[01:30:53] **ANGIE:** We'll come back, and we'll take it from the expungement of the record in California.

[01:31:00] **ROBBY:** Okay, or whatever else we remember. Now you guys can think of some questions. It's much easier for me to do this [if you ask me questions] .

[01:31:10] **ANGIE:** Just tell me what year that was when you you pled.

[01:31:17] **ROBBY:** When I copped a plea. I'd have to ask Molly because my friend, who Karen knows, Molly Mulally, who was married to Skip but they're not married anymore. I had been staying with them whenever I came down for a hearing or something in the Alameda County Courthouse. We took the kids over to the Alameda County Courthouse.

[01:31:50] **KAREN:** You were all in California?

[01:31:52] **ROBBY:** No. She was in California and I was working here in Seattle, and then I'd have to make my way down to California for one hearing or another.

They were ready to move out of California and they were looking to move—I had told them about Whidbey Island, so I found this place on Whidbey called Raspberry Flats, which is this really nice farm on Whidbey that could be rented. We got it, so our plan was that they would move up there, and then when I got out of prison, I could come there.

[01:32:34] **KAREN:** Oh, so that's your connection to Whidbey Island.

[01:32:37] **ROBBY:** I had been out there. I was the one that found the place. I had been going out to Whidbey for a long time.

As it turned out, I didn't have to go to prison, so we all drove up from Oakland to Whidbey Island, where I lived for a while.

[01:32:54] **KAREN:** And Molly had a daughter, Siri.

[01:32:54] **ROBBY:** Yeah, and a son named Oliver.

[01:32:58] **KAREN:** So, she was around during this time. Right?

[01:33:00] **ROBBY:** Yes. I first met Siri in 1967 or 68, when she was one year old, for her one-year-old birthday.

[01:33:10] **ANGIE:** I think we should wind it up for right now.

[01:33:17] **ROBBY:** Okay.

[01:33:18] **ANGIE:** That is the conclusion of part one of the life and times of Robby Stern. Thank you.